University of Cumbria

Darwell, John (2016) The dark river: Agecroft - Salford. The dark river, 5 . Café Royal Books, Southport, UK.

Downloaded from: http://insight.cumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/2835/

Usage of any items from the University of Cumbria's institutional repository 'Insight' must conform to the following fair usage guidelines.

Any item and its associated metadata held in the University of Cumbria's institutional repository Insight (unless stated otherwise on the metadata record) may be copied, displayed or performed, and stored in line with the JISC fair dealing guidelines (available here) for educational and not-for-profit activities

provided that

- the authors, title and full bibliographic details of the item are cited clearly when any part of the work is referred to verbally or in the written form
- a hyperlink/URL to the original Insight record of that item is included in any citations of the work
- the content is not changed in any way
- all files required for usage of the item are kept together with the main item file.

You may not

- sell any part of an item
- refer to any part of an item without citation
- amend any item or contextualise it in a way that will impugn the creator's reputation
- remove or alter the copyright statement on an item.

The full policy can be found here.
Alternatively contact the University of Cumbria Repository Editor by emailing insight@cumbria.ac.uk.

Café Royal Books
caferoyalbooks.com
Edited by Craig Atkinson
Edition of 150

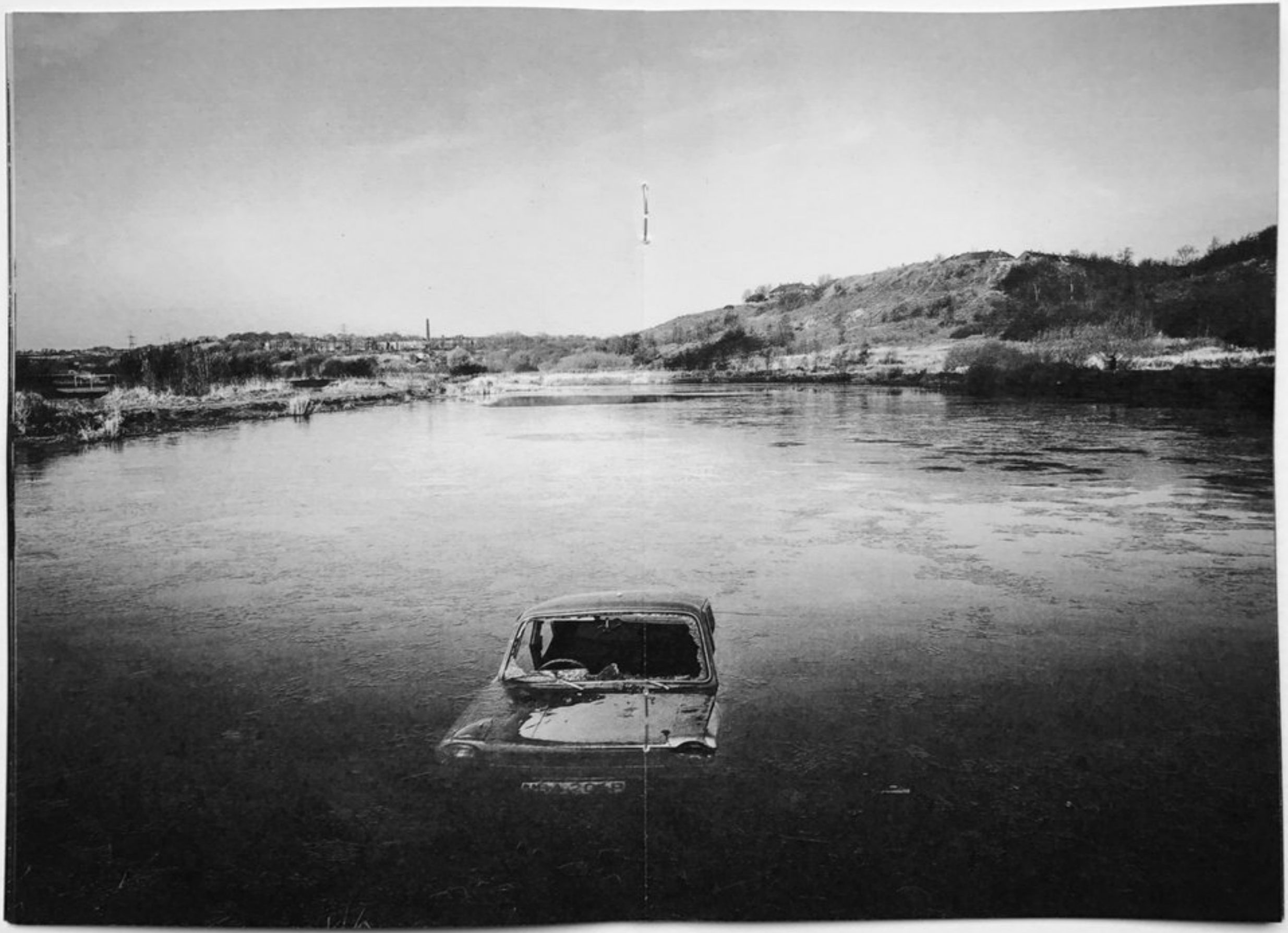
© 2015 John Darwell
& Café Royal Books
All rights reserved
1015

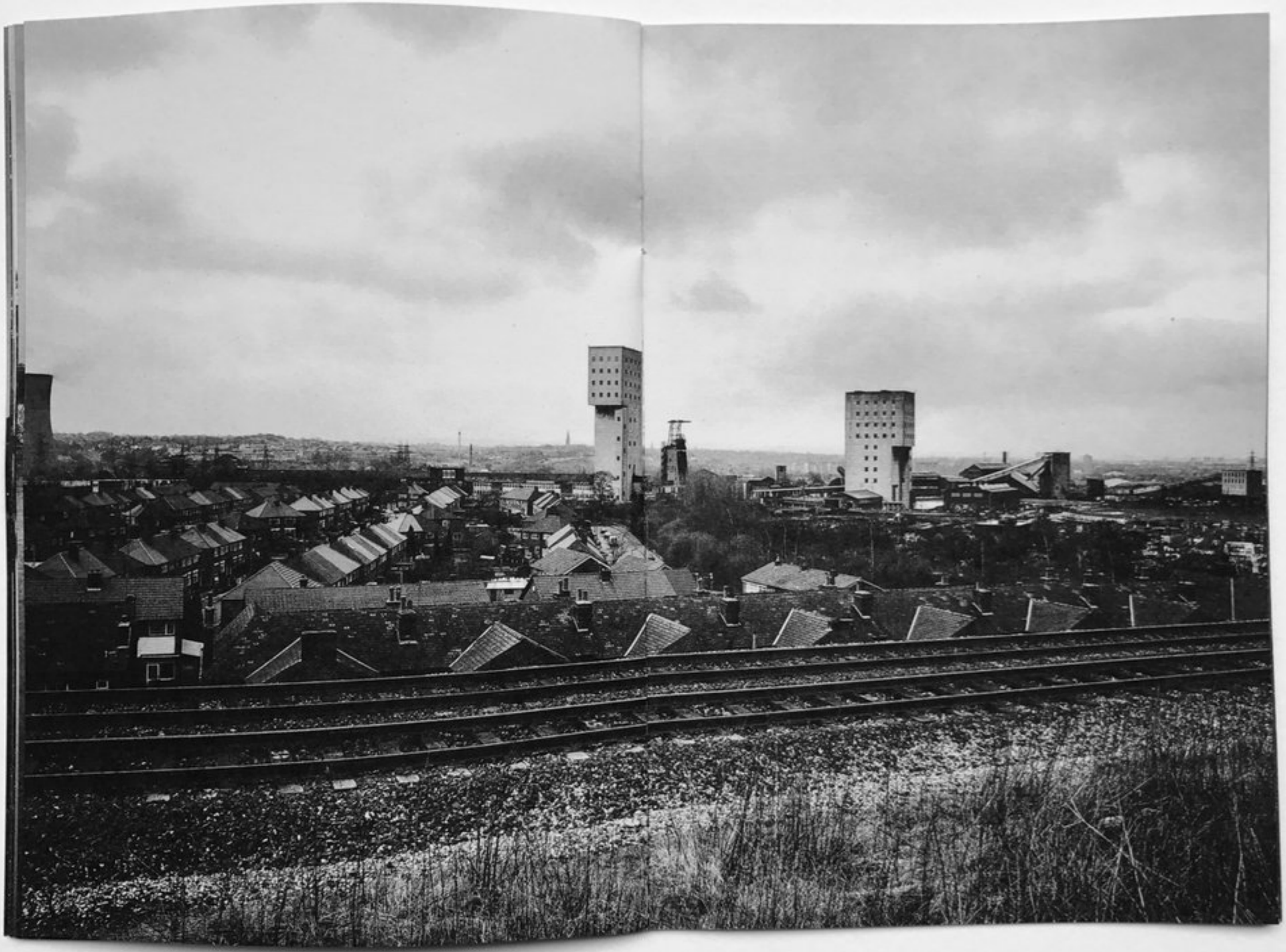
The Dark River
Agecroft — Salford

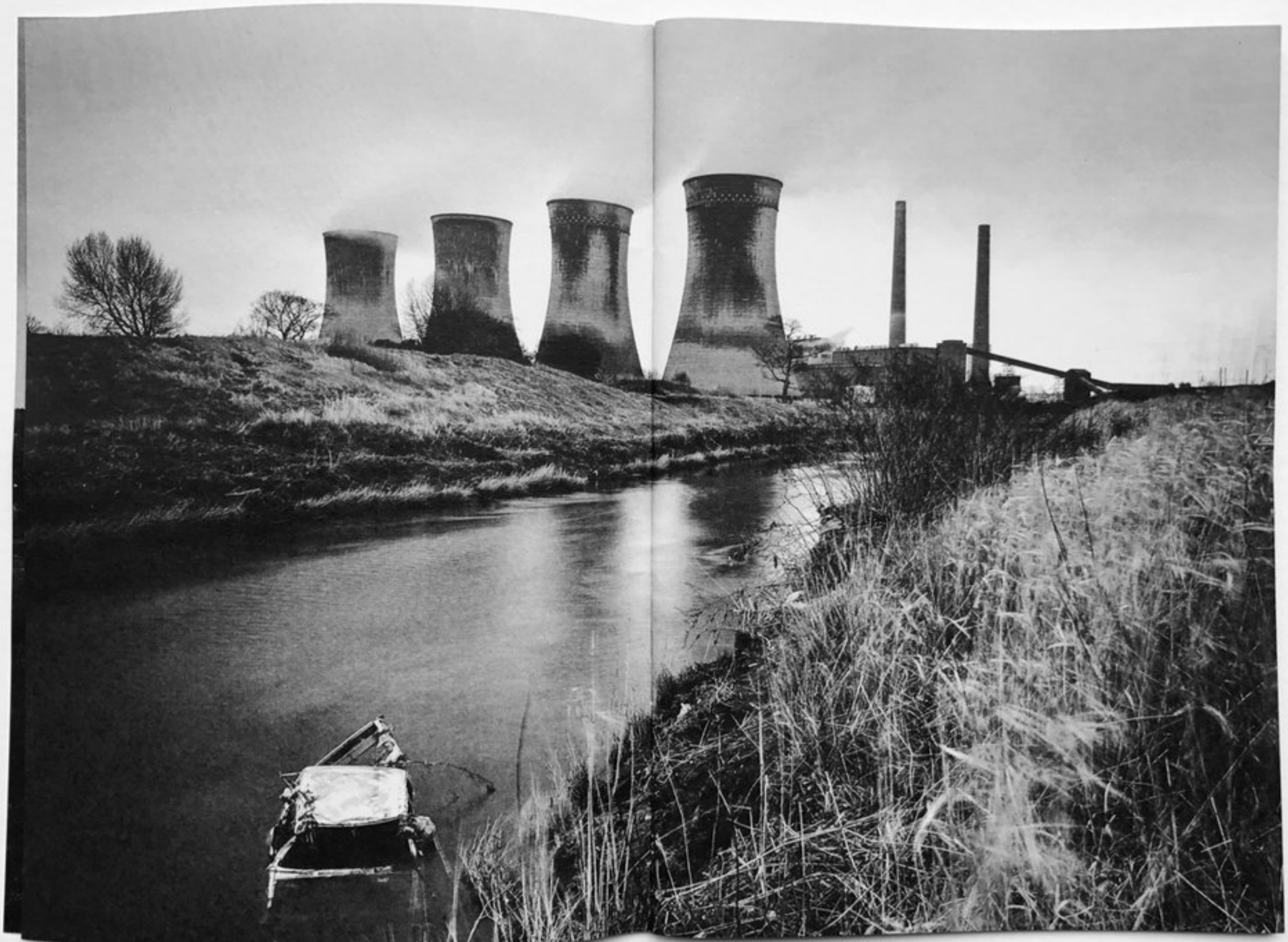
CRB

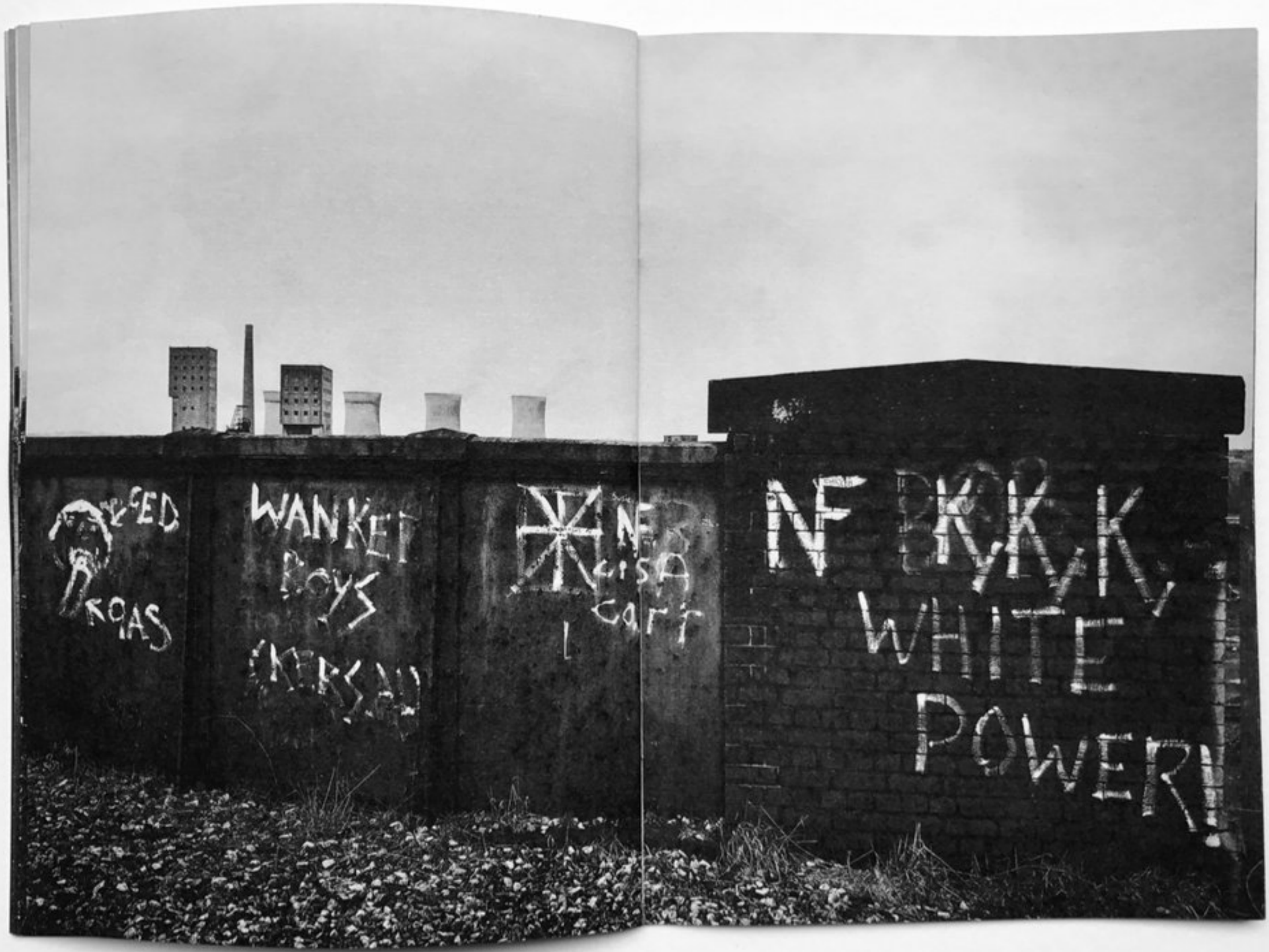
John Darwell

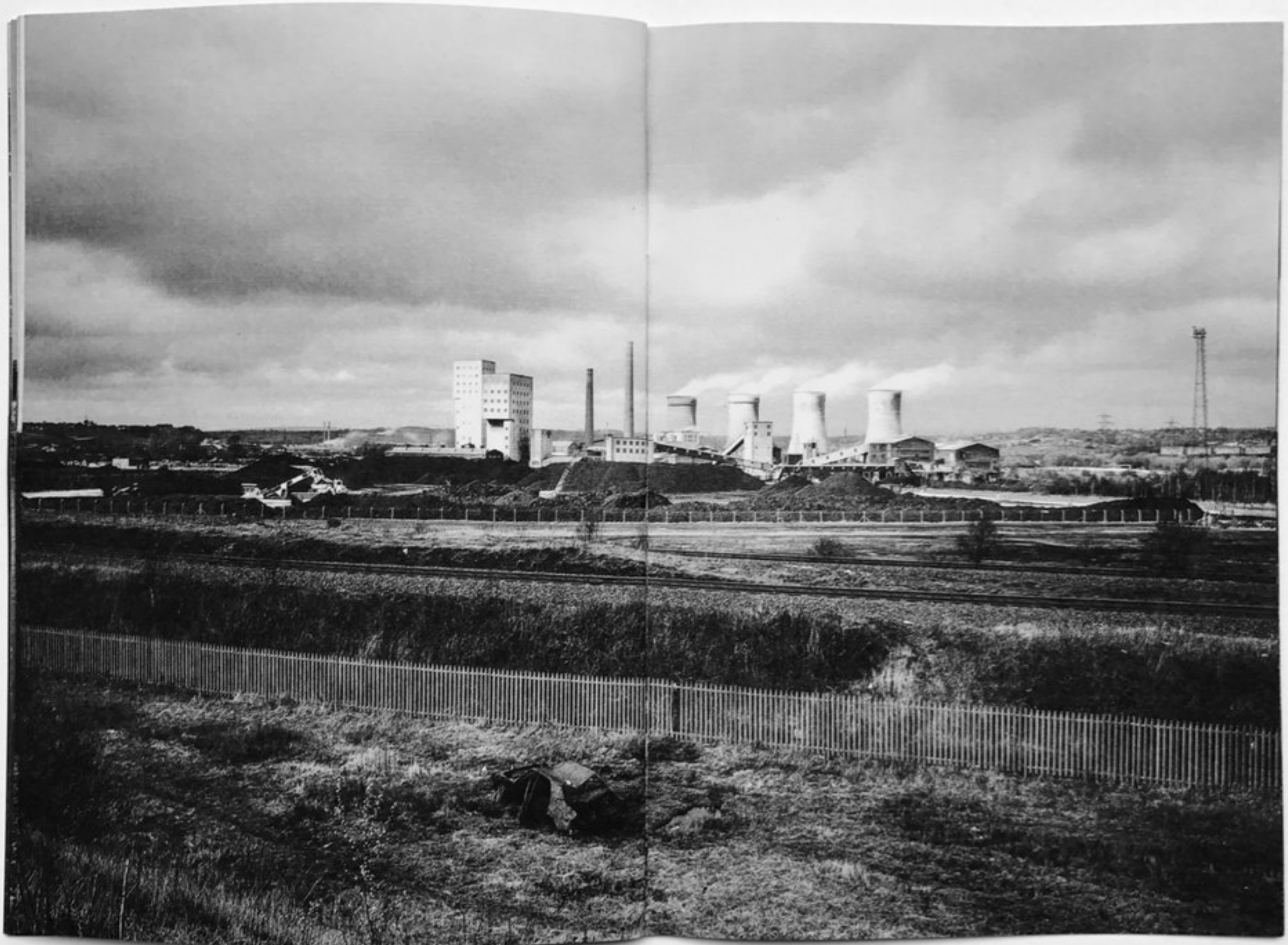

City of Salford
SILVERDALE
Landscape Reclamation Scheme
SALFORD & TRAFFORD
GROUNDWORK
Blakedown

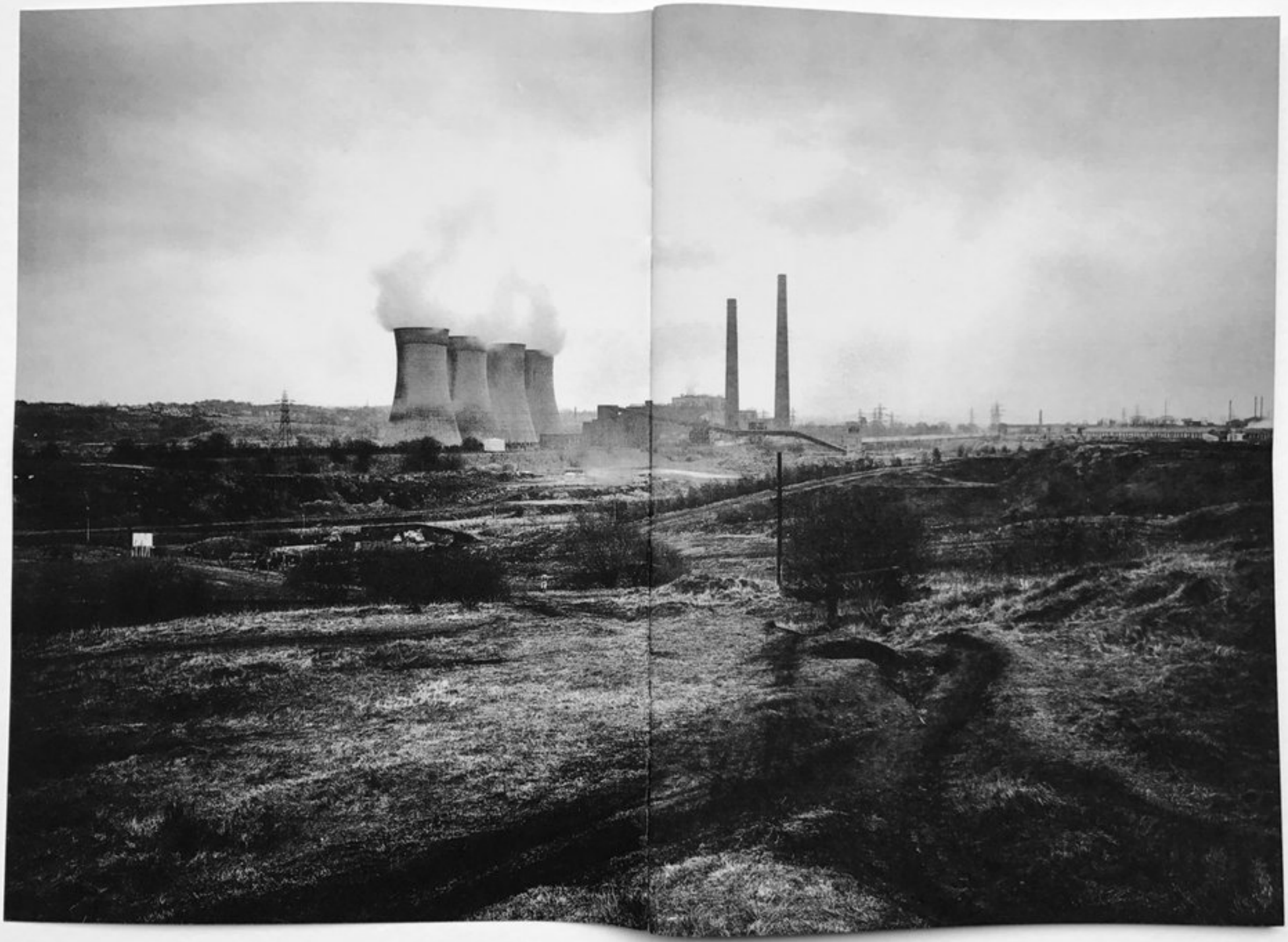


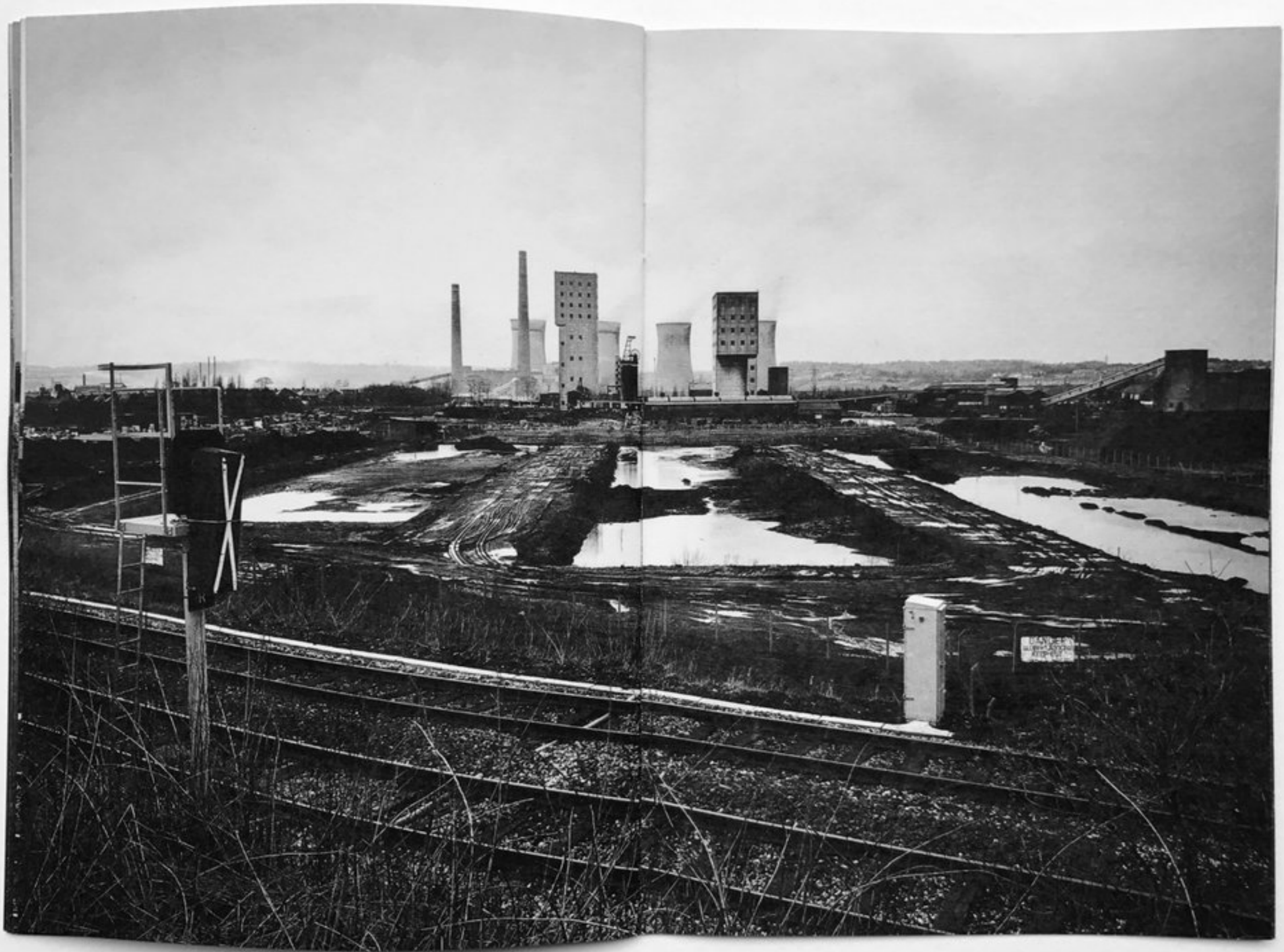





WANKER
BOYS
NF
BKKK
WHITE
POWER







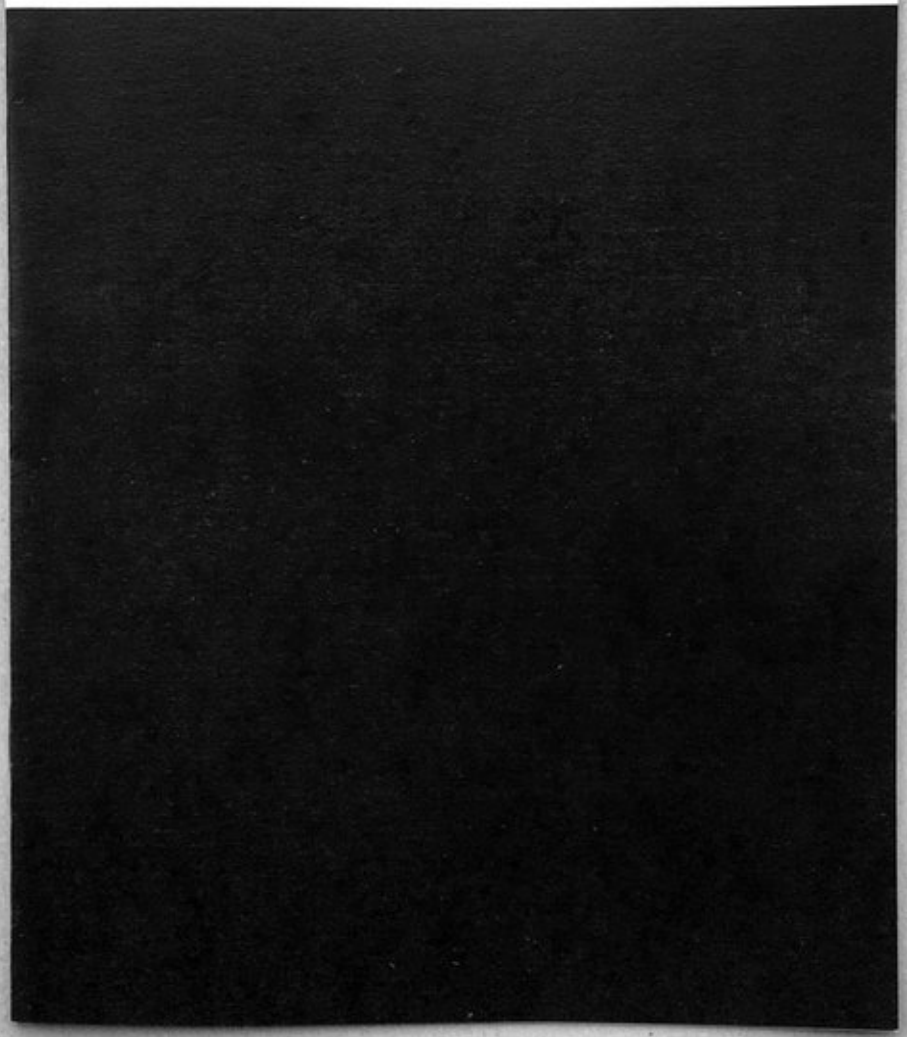
Café Royal Books
caferoyalbooks.com
Edited by Craig Atkinson
Edition of 100

© 2015 Paul Herrmann
& Café Royal Books
All rights reserved
1115

Reflections on Dark River

CRB

Paul Herrmann



Reflections on Dark River

Paul Herrmann

Reflections on Dark River
Paul Herrmann, 2015

Every great city needs its great river. A city and its river grow up together. In many ways the river *is* the city.

Visitors to Manchester, which has unquestionably been a great industrial city, are sometimes surprised not to see a river. The River Irwell is there, of course, but you're unlikely to stumble on it if you're just visiting the main attractions. The surface is some way below road level, so the water's often in shadow. And the city seems to turn its back on the river – buildings face away; few people sit by the river with a drink; or row along it, or even walk by it.

I remember arriving in Manchester myself and wondering why the city didn't seem to like the river. What went wrong between Manchester, Salford and the Irwell?

Things used to be very different. Manchester grew up as a small town in the middle ages where the River Irk met the Irwell. The streets of Deansgate and Shude Hill and the rivers converged at a spot where a church and a college were built - now the Cathedral and Chetham's.

Just two centuries ago, you could drink the water of the Irwell, and fish for salmon and trout from the Albert Bridge. Agecroft was a favourite spot for fly fishing (as well as painters). The world's oldest anglers' society, The Salford Friendly, was set up in 1817.

Even as the mills and factories sprang up, the Irwell was still a source of pleasure. A local writer, calling himself "An Old Manchester Man," wrote in Canal News of a trip in the late 1830s: "The river in those days showed a cleaner face than now, its present dirty appearance was little dreamt of, and the surroundings were pleasant. In the field adjoining the Quay, buttercups and daisies mingled their sparkling heads in the grass to the water's edge … The sun's rays glancing on the water made it look like a streak of silver, along which it was pleasant to sail, and listen to the lark chanting his early morning hymn of praise, while Nature all around was attired in her greenest and brightest robes."

But the Irwell's descent had already begun; and gathered pace. The rate of change in these decades in Manchester is without parallel in the UK.

Engels wrote of the appalling conditions around the Irk in 1844, "a narrow, coal-black, foul-

smelling stream", the homes next to it "unqualifiedly the most horrible dwellings which I have yet beheld." Cholera was rife.

By 1862 the Irwell was described by a geologist, Hugh Miller, as "considerably less a river than a flood of liquid manure, in which all life dies, whether animal or vegetable". Tens of thousands of tons per year of ash, cinders, refuse and industrial waste were dumped in it.

The pollution and the smell were noticed of course, and some attempts were made to address them. Salford Corporation pushed for an act of parliament to allow them to counter polluters; they appointed a river inspector; notices were sent and prosecutions began. 28 local authorities, who you'd think should have known better, were asked to stop discharging raw sewage into the Irwell.

Still, nothing much changed for a century. In 1945, The City of Manchester was so embarrassed by the Irwell that they planned to culvert the river, cover it over in the city, and build gardens on top. While Dean Martin was singing about the bridges of Paris, the British Field Sports Society wrote of the Irwell: "There are no fish in these rivers (apart from a very occasional tributary), no insects, no weeds, no life of any kind except sewage fungus, nothing but chemicals and any dirt which cannot be put to profitable use."

There was another debate in Parliament in 1950, introduced by a local MP, Anthony Greenwood. The river was variously described as a sewer, a drain and a melancholy stream. Its transparency was often less than an inch. The scum was sometimes so thick that the birds walked on it. It changed colour as dye was dumped: bright orange at 8am and jet black at noon. Foam on the surface was sometimes 18 inches deep. One MP, James Hudson, who by then had moved south, recalled "I have had a closer experience of the Irwell than even my honourable Friend the Member for Rossendale has had. I fell into it. Indeed, I fell into it in days when the water was infinitely worse than it is now, when it was absolutely black and when the stink of it was different from all other stinks which have ever been experienced by man."

I've told these stories to a few people, and none of them were really surprised. We all know about the industrial revolution; many Mancunians are proud of their city's past, and mostly we try and forget its horrors.

To Victorian Manchester industrialists, the greatness of the city came from hard work. Everybody, and everything, was worked as hard as it could be in the service of growth and profit, and that included the Irwell. This is the sense in which it was a great river. What made it great? Not a broad tumbling torrent like the Thames or the Seine, not a visual treat to inspire poets and painters; it was a question of how much money it could make. Factories, mills, tanneries, sewage pipes were shoulder to shoulder along parts of the Irwell, all filling it with as much muck as they could get away with.

In 1907 the Borough Engineer of Salford had called it "the hardest worked river in the world." The MP Anthony Greenwood later said "No other inland river has made a greater contribution to the industrial greatness of this country." It just wasn't then a river that anyone wanted to look at, or paint, or write songs or poems about.

—

John Darwell walked and photographed around the Irwell from 1984-7, alongside and just after his much better known project on the Manchester Ship Canal. The Ship Canal he had found a relative hive of activity, still sustaining life, not in its waters but alongside in its remnants of industrial labour. The Irwell was darker and deader; perhaps sorrier than at any time in its life.

It's difficult to feel much affection for the river valley we see in his photographs. Recurring motifs are: the submerged or burnt out car, stolen and dumped by joyriders. Old hunks of stone and concrete and brick – supports for bridges or structures that aren't there any more. Scraggy trees and clumps of hard grass; an encroaching messy, scrubby mass of growth. Endless depressing fences, the kind you run into that seem only to be there for the purpose of stopping you walking. Chimneys, none of them smoking. The river, always opaque. We can only ever see the black or silver surface.

There's hardly anyone about. The houses look like they've been carelessly tossed into this derelict landscape, like dice rolled onto carpet. They end abruptly, tufts and litter up against the fences. But the circles of human influence seem to radiate further. Black mud "desire paths" lead out from the houses. Signs are shot up. A milepost on its own. Piles of rubbish, not just the cars but strings and ropes of plastic and paper strangling the riverside trees and challenging the river to wash them away.

All of this framed by giant works of rusting iron. Behind, huge factories, mostly obscured behind fences or trees. It's quite likely that in Darwell's photos they were still the last of the bleach works, tanneries, mills and factories mentioned in the 1950 parliamentary debate. Agecroft and Kearsley power stations loom large as the centrepieces. John was there as they were demolished. The stink, and the folk names, lingered a bit longer. Death Valley, maybe named because of the children who died picking coal near the old Chloride factory, smelt of sulphur and rot.

What are we looking at, in this body of work? On one hand a landscape

that seems familiar to anyone who lives in an industrial city, visits its edges and gets to know the tears in its fabric. But also a transition point. John was photographing in the depths of Thatcherism. 150 years of industry in Northern England is being closed down. The factories are being scrubbed out, but we see little by way of replacement – bashed signs, dumped cars, emptiness. Darwell is showing us the very end of a removal process on a scale that's rarely possible to photograph.

Darwell had been influenced at this time in his life by the New Topographics, particularly Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams, but I think his work here is less overtly iconographic than the Americans', perhaps more intensely felt. They're pictures made with control, but the anger or sadness of them comes through. The more I look at them, the more they feel raw and real. In its style the work moves away from Darwell's more documentarian Big Ditch, and looks forward to his enthusiastic adoption of colour photography in the later 1980s.

Darwell calls this an unfinished project; he divorced and needed to move to Scotland. I'm not sure though; in fact I wonder whether or how it would have been possible to finish. *Panta rhei*, said Hereclitus; everything flows. You can't step twice into the same stream. You can't finish a portrait of a river. That's what keeps pulling you back. "Rivers ... are time itself," wrote the philosopher Heidegger.

Ozymandias comes to mind. Darwell, like Shelley, is describing the collapse of a great power. Vast trunkless legs of brick and stone, with the river stretching away. So much of what must have looked permanent and timeless has already gone since he photographed. Darwell wandered for long enough in the heartland of this industrial empire to capture the essence of its end. We should be grateful for his foresight.

–

What of the Irwell now? Well, as Manchester settles down as a post-industrial city, making money from leisure and tourism, the river is getting cleaner, being repurposed as a destination. Dave Quartermain of Uswim Openwater leads swimming sessions in Dock 9 of Salford Quays, fed by the Irwell. "There's less infection in a dock like this than there will be inside your local swimming pool," he says (though Dock 8 remains closed due to "re-occurring pollution issues").

It's still not that easy a river to walk along. In the city centre, any architecture built before the 1990s runs hard up to the river edge; pedestrians and sightseers are an inconvenience. A secretive BT building discharges liquid continuously; maybe no more than a well overflow, but it looks dodgy. There have been a couple of recent bridges, elegant walkways that take people to and from various tax offices and shopping centres.

In its rural and suburban stretches its banks and beds are being cleaned; those daisies and buttercups, wildlife, even fish are reappearing. Darwell often walks along the Agecroft stretch, since his daughter lives near. He talked recently about how it looks different to when he photographed it first: "the awesome monumentality has disappeared. It's a pleasant walk, in a fairly bland kind of way, but any sense of history has gone and the people with it. I'm not saying in any sense things were better then – it was polluted and grim – but a grandness of scale has been lost."

That's not to belittle the achievements of the consortium that cleans up the Irwell. 20 agencies – councils, volunteer groups, universities, even the Salford Anglers, now work together in a way that Salford's Victorian river inspector couldn't have dreamt of. Who could complain if mass industrial competition is supplanted by mass collaborative environmentalism?

But like a landed eel the river keeps twitching – it's not necessarily going to behave as we want it. Every year or two the river changes colour as an old mine tunnel collapses or something new and unpleasant gets discharged. As I was writing this, in July 2015, the Irwell turned orange again, like thick tomato soup.

On the site of Agecroft is now a private local prison called Forest Bank, run by Sodexo. It was praised for the good relationships between warders and prisoners until one of the warders was found with 147 wraps of heroin in his shoes, for selling to the prisoners. Enterprise begets enterprise, stretching, often transgressing, the law of the day.

Next to the river, the industrial revolution seems so short. In the space of half a dozen generations, Agecroft has seen fly fishing replaced by industry, power and pollution on a vast scale, replaced again by a parody of industry and postmodern ruralism. Beside it, the Irwell slips along quietly.

–

References:

Friedrich Engels, The Condition of The Working Class in England, 1844
J Corbett, The River Irwell, 1907
The City of Manchester Plan 1945
Hansard, 18 April 1950
John Corbridge, Mersey and Irwell Navigation, 1979
David Elystan Owen, The Manchester Ship Canal, 1983
Rivers Return – The Irwell Catchment Pilot, 2012
Creative Concern, Restoration Revolution: The River Irwell (Vimeo), 2013

With thanks to Allie for corrections and suggestions.